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NGOs call upon the European Commission to turn down Loan Application for Bulgarian Nuclear Plant

Today, over 160 NGOs from 33 European countries wrote to EU Commissioners, Andris Piebalgs and Stavros Dimas, to voice their opposition to a proposed EURATOM loan for the Belene nuclear power plant (NPP) in Bulgaria. After private banks from Germany, Italy, Switzerland, France and the U.S. refused to provide financing for the construction of the NPP, the Bulgarian Government recently announced its intention to apply for a 300 million Euro loan from the EURATOM facility.

“It would be a scandal if European taxpayers money was used to fund a project, that even commercial banks consider to be too controversial”, says Heffa Schuecking, from the German environment organization, Urgewald. In 2006, public protests in front of bank offices in 60 cities and over 10,000 letters led three major German Banks (Deutsche Bank, HypoVereinsbank and Commerzbank) to withdraw their interest in the Belene project. The construction of the Belene NPP was taken up in 1987, but the project was scrapped in the 1990s, after the Bulgarian Cabinet deemed it to be „technically unsafe and economically unviable“. However, in 2004 the Government revived the project and in 2006, the contract for the construction of Belene was awarded to the Russian company Atomstroyexport.

The proposed nuclear plant is of soviet design, a modernized version of the VVER-1000/320 reactor, and is slated to be built in an earthquake area in the North of Bulgaria, close to the Romanian border. “We don’t want to live every day with the fear of a new Chernobyl“, says Nicolae Dragnea, President of the National Union of County Councils of Romania, who represents the communities living across the border. “Vested interests are trying to push through this project in spite of its enormous risks. During the last earthquake 200 people were killed only 12 km from the Belene site”, says Albena Simeonova, one of Bulgaria’s most well-known environmentalists, who in the past received death threats for her opposition to the Belene project.

In the letter to the EU Commission, NGOs point out, that a project like Belene would not receive a license in countries like Germany or the U.S. due to safety concerns and that EURATOM has never before granted a loan for the construction of a VVER-reactor in a European member state. As decisions on EURATOM loans are made by the EU Commission, NGOs call upon the Commissioners to ensure that European public money is not used to back a venture that will endanger the safety of European citizens.

For further information and a copy of the NGO letter contact Heffa Schuecking at heffa@urgewald.de or (49)-160-96761436. See also www.urgewald.de.